

After Delay, Dem Allies Join Health Care Fight

By Reid Wilson
March 15, 2010

House Dem leaders will have new incentives to win over vulnerable members reconsidering their health care votes as a host of party allies prepare to launch a barrage of new ads supporting the reform effort.

The new ad spending, led by groups as diverse as SEIU, PhRMA, MoveOn.org and the Consumers Union, will counter millions the Chamber of Commerce and other GOP allies have spent over the last week -- an amount that had some Dems worrying their allies had abandoned the fight.

Beginning tomorrow, Dem allies are rejoining the battle. Americans For Stable Quality Care, a pro-reform group that pairs progressive organizations like Families USA with PhRMA, will launch a \$12M ad blitz. SEIU, AFSCME, Health Care for America Now and MoveOn.org are also launching its own TV campaign, to the tune of \$3.1M.

Americans United for Change is targeting African American communities with \$485K in radio and TV ad buys. The National Women's Law Center, Doctors for America and other groups are also joining the fight this week.

Both sides have spent hundreds of millions to influence public opinion over the past year, but Dems worried their side was being outspent in the critical final week. Speaker Nancy Pelosi and WH senior advisor David Axelrod have been most instrumental in convincing Dem allies to step up their efforts on vulnerable incumbents' behalf.

"Collectively, people aren't surprised that the industry, when it comes to an issue that is near and dear to their hearts, spends a lot of resources to try and defeat it," said Tom McMahon, executive director at Americans United for Change.

During the course of what Dems hope is the final week of the health care push, the Chamber of Commerce has spent millions in ads targeting specific members. Ads are airing in 17 states targeting 27 Dems who voted for the bill and 13 who opposed it, and the Chamber has already spent \$11M on their latest campaign, with more to come.

Dems need to be able to convince wavering members they won't be buried under an avalanche of anti-health care ads if they vote for final passage. Incumbents like Reps. Jason Altmire (D-PA), John Boccieri (D-OH) and Betsy Markey (D-CO), all of whom voted against the first version of the bill, need to be reassured they will have allies on their side if they switch positions.

The Chamber, meanwhile, is targeting all 3 of those incumbents. And until this weekend, Dems were nervous their allies were jeopardizing health care reform by failing to invest the kinds of resources needed to woo vulnerable members.

On the Dem side, labor and progressive groups have spent more than \$100M on advertisements during the course of the health care fight. But during what Dems hope is the last week of the legislative push, anti-reform groups have vastly outspent pro-reform groups, according to Evan Tracy, president of the Campaign Media Analysis Group.

"Democrats are facing an avalanche of negative ads by pro-insurance industry groups without any cover from proponents of health insurance reform," said one senior House Dem aide.

Those worries were misplaced, according to several sources with knowledge of the impending ad blitz. "People are a little bit freaked out by the Chamber and how big it was, and that there wasn't an automatic response to it," one strategist said.

Dem allies said the new sense of urgency now that there is a final bill -- the House Budget Committee will mark up the reconciliation measure this afternoon -- once again opened spigots that had been closed.

"When it looked like things were going smoothly, I think people don't feel the urgency as much as people do when the cards are on the table and there are some tough votes to be taken," McMahon said. "Issue fights like this always have ebbs and flows, and that's why we've tried to be a constant voice, no matter what."